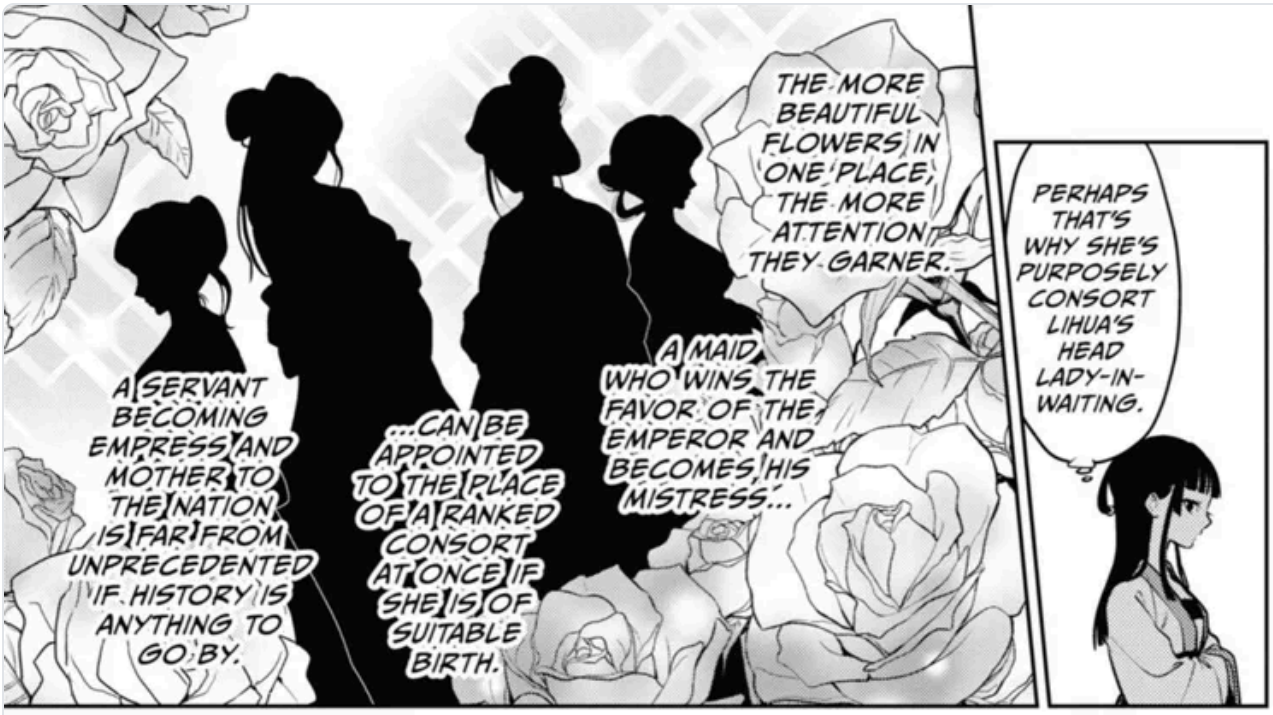
Chapter 52
I REALLY WANT TO TAKE A BATH RIGHT NOW...
SPLASH
...BUT I'M JUST GLAD THAT THEY PROVIDED ME WITH A CHANGE OF CLOTHES.
THE MAID'S ILLNESS ISN'T ALL THAT CONTAGIOUS ...
...BUT IT WOULDN'T DO FOR ME TO WALK AROUND THE PALACE COVERED IN THE PHLEGM OF THE SICK.
BUT IF I'D KNOWN THAT I'D FIND HER IN ONE VISIT...
...I MIGHT HAVE DONE WITHOUT THE DISGUISE.
PLAYING A COURT LADY ESCORTED BY THE PHYSICIAN...
...DID JUST WHAT I DIDN'T WANT IT TO DO AND DREW ALL EYES MY WAY.
NOW, THEN...
SHWIP

THE BAREST MINIMUM OF PEOPLE REQUIRED HAVE ASSEMBLED IN THE PARLOR OF THE CRYSTAL PALACE.
THE USUAL DUO OF JINSHI AND GAO SHUN.
CONSORT LIHUA.
PLEASE EXPLAIN YOURSELF, LADY XING.

AND THE HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING OF THE CRYSTAL PALACE...
...WHO ALSO HAPPENS TO BE CONSORT LIHUA'S COUSIN...
XING.
Chapter 52: A Third Turn at the Crystal Palace ③

SHE HAS GUTS, KEEPING UP THIS ATTITUDE DURING JINSHI'S QUESTION-ING...
...I'LL GIVE HER THAT.
GOING THE SILENT ROUTE, I SEE.
.....
SHE AND CONSORT LIHUA COME FROM THE SAME LINEAGE.
IT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ODD FOR HER TO BE GRANTED A PLACE AS A MID-RANKING CONSORT.
SHE MAY EVEN BE IN A POSI-TION...
...TO COMPLAIN ABOUT BEING INTER-ROGATED BY AN INFERIOR EUNUCH.
HER FEATURES RESEMBLE CONSORT LIHUA'S TOO.
SHE HAS THE LOOK OF A PROUD, HAUGHTY BEAUTY WHO TURNS HEADS.


A SERVANT BECOMING EMPRESS AND MOTHER TO THE NATION IS FAR FROM UNPRECEDENTED IF HISTORY IS ANYTHING TO GO BY.
...CAN BE APPOINTED TO THE PLACE OF A RANKED CONSORT AT ONCE IF SHE IS OF SUITABLE BIRTH.
A MAID WHO WINS THE FAVOR OF THE EMPEROR AND BECOMES HIS MISTRESS...
THE MORE BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS IN ONE PLACE, THE MORE ATTENTION THEY GARNER.
PERHAPS THAT'S WHY SHE'S PURPOSELY CONSORT LIHUA'S HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING.

A CONSORT WOULD REST FAR EASIER BY SURROUNDING HERSELF WITH ROBUST BONDS OF TRUST THAT TRANSCEND SUCH DISCORD.
BUT IN SUCH CASES...
...THE FEELINGS OF THE WOMEN INVOLVED MUST BE QUITE COMPLI-CATED.

MAR-RIAGE
MAR-RIAGE
...WHOSE DEDICATION TO HER WORK HAS LED TO HER MISSING THE WINDOW OF MARRIAGEABLE AGE.
THAT'S WHY IT'D BE NICE IF CONSORT GYOKUYO COULD ARRANGE A MATCH FOR HER HEAD LADY HONG-NIANG...

WHILE ALL THE ATTENDANTS AT THE JADE PALACE ARE PRETTY...
THEY STRIVE TO DEDICATE THEM-SELVES TO THEIR CONSORT.
...OF TRYING TO WIN HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY'S AFFEC-TIONS.
...I VERY MUCH DOUBT ANY ONE OF THEM WOULD ENTERTAIN THE GRAND NOTION...
CONSORT GYOKUYO IS BLESSED IN THAT RESPECT.

I'M SURE SHE WON'T BE BLAMED FOR KEEPING THE MAID HIDDEN AWAY IN THE SHED.
SHE TOOK APPROPRIATE MEASURES IN REMOVING THE GIRL FROM THE MAIN BUILDING TO ENSURE THAT HER ILLNESS DID NOT SPREAD.
MEANWHILE, THE HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING HERE...
...HAS BEEN SECRETLY HOARDING PROHIBITED GOODS...
...WITH THE INTENTION OF COOKING SOMETHING HARMFUL UP.
THE PHYSICIAN'S OFFICE MAY NOW BE SOMETHING MORE AKIN TO A TEA HOUSE SINCE THE QUACK HARDLY GETS ANY PATIENTS...
...BUT HE IS NEVER-THELESS THE INNER COURT'S SOLE DOCTOR.
EXAMINING SOMEONE OF SUCH LOW RANK WOULD PROBABLY COME FAR DOWN ON HIS LIST OF PRIORITIES.
A MAID WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO GO TO THE CLINIC OF HER OWN ACCORD EITHER.
SOME OF THE COURT LADIES HERE DISLIKE THE IDEA OF WOMEN OFFERING MEDICAL TREATMENT.
LIVES HAVE BEEN LOST BECAUSE OF THIS, WHICH IS BEYOND FRUS-TRATING...

...BUT IT IS WHAT IT IS.
IT JUST GOES TO SHOW HOW LIGHTLY THE LIVES OF SERVANTS ARE TAKEN HERE.
SURELY JINSHI WILL CONSIDER IT ALL...
...IN HIS ATTEMPT TO USE THE PIECES OF EVIDENCE WE HAVE TO PROVE THE MISDEEDS THAT HE CAN.
WHY ARE YOU IN POSSESSION OF COMMODITIES THAT HAVE BEEN BANNED?
WHAT WERE YOU PLANNING TO DO WITH THEM?
WHATEVER CAN YOU MEAN?

SHE'S TRYING TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT.
...JUST SO SHE COULD GO AND RANSACK MY LADY'S PROPERTY WITHOUT WARNING?
...IS ANOTHER CONSORT'S MAID DEMANDING TO MEET WITH LADY LIHUA...
HOWEVER, WOULD YOU NOT SAY THAT THE FAR BIGGER PROBLEM HERE...
I ADMIT THAT IT WAS I WHO ORDERED THE MAID TO BE MOVED INTO THE SHED.
...ACTUALLY BELONG TO XING.
WE HAVE NO PROOF THAT THE VARIOUS PERFUME OILS AND SPICES FOUND IN THE SHED...
...IN THE CRACK-DOWN.
THAT'S PROBABLY WHY HERS WEREN'T CONFIS-CATED...
!
...SHE DIDN'T SMELL OF THEM AT ALL.
WHEN I CAME BY HERE BEFORE TRYING TO CONFIRM THE USE OF THE OILS...
BUT I COULD SMELL THEIR LINGERING SCENTS ON HER TODAY.

I'M SURE THAT MAID WILL BE ABLE TO TELL ME WHAT I NEED TO KNOW.
SO BE IT, THEN.
SO YOU KNEW SHE WAS DELIRIOUS WITH FEVER, DID YOU?
...WHO IS DAZED AND DELIRIOUS WITH FEVER?
AND JUST HOW MUCH CAN YOU TRUST THE RAMBLINGS OF A MAID...
...TO GO OUT OF YOUR WAY TO CHECK ON THE CONDITION OF A HUMBLE SERVING GIRL.
HOW VERY KIND OF YOU...

I REALLY DO UNDERSTAND THAT, BUT I CAN'T LET IT GO.
I SHOULD PROBABLY REIN IT IN NOW.
IT WOULD MAKE SENSE FOR YOU TO STILL SMELL OF THE PERFUME OILS, THEN.
YOU SMELL LIKE THIS PERFUME OIL TODAY, LADY XING.
THERE ARE JUST SOME THINGS THAT MAKE ME SEE RED.

WOULD YOU MIND IF I CHECKED TO BE SURE?
IS ITS FRAGRANCE TRULY SO PUNGENT THAT IT WOULD SEEP OUT OF BOTH BOTTLE AND TRUNK AND CLING TO YOU?
THIS BOTTLE WAS AMONG THE CONTENTS FOUND IN THE WICKER TRUNK.
?!
SHP
SLAP
119

MY APOLO-GIES.
IT IS NOT APPROPRIATE FOR SOMEONE OF MY LOWLY STATION TO TOUCH YOU.
PERHAPS YOU WOULD ALLOW SOMEONE MORE SUITABLE TO CHECK.
DILATED PUPILS. THE UNPLEASANT REEK OF SWEAT.
BOTH ARE SIGNS THAT SHE'S NERVOUS.
WE'RE NEARLY THERE.
WOULD YOU...
...ENTRUST THIS TO ME?

CONSORT LIHUA'S GOWN TODAY...
...IS QUITE SIMILAR IN STYLE TO THOSE CONSORT GYOKUYO HAS BEEN WEARING LATELY.
...LADY LIHUA.
...OH? WHAT'S THIS?
WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE CRIME OF WHICH YOU SUSPECT THIS WOMAN?
...THEN IT WOULD BE TANTAMOUNT TO KILLING A CHILD OF THE EMPEROR.
IF SHE WAS INDEED ATTEMPTING TO MAKE SOMETHING THAT WOULD INDUCE MIS-CARRIAGE...

EVEN IF I WAS THE ONLY ONE SHE WAS TARGETING?
NO MATTER WHICH CONSORT'S CHILD WAS THE TARGET?
BUT OF COURSE.
AND THERE WE HAVE IT.
MY LADY!
DO YOU MEAN TO SAY...?!

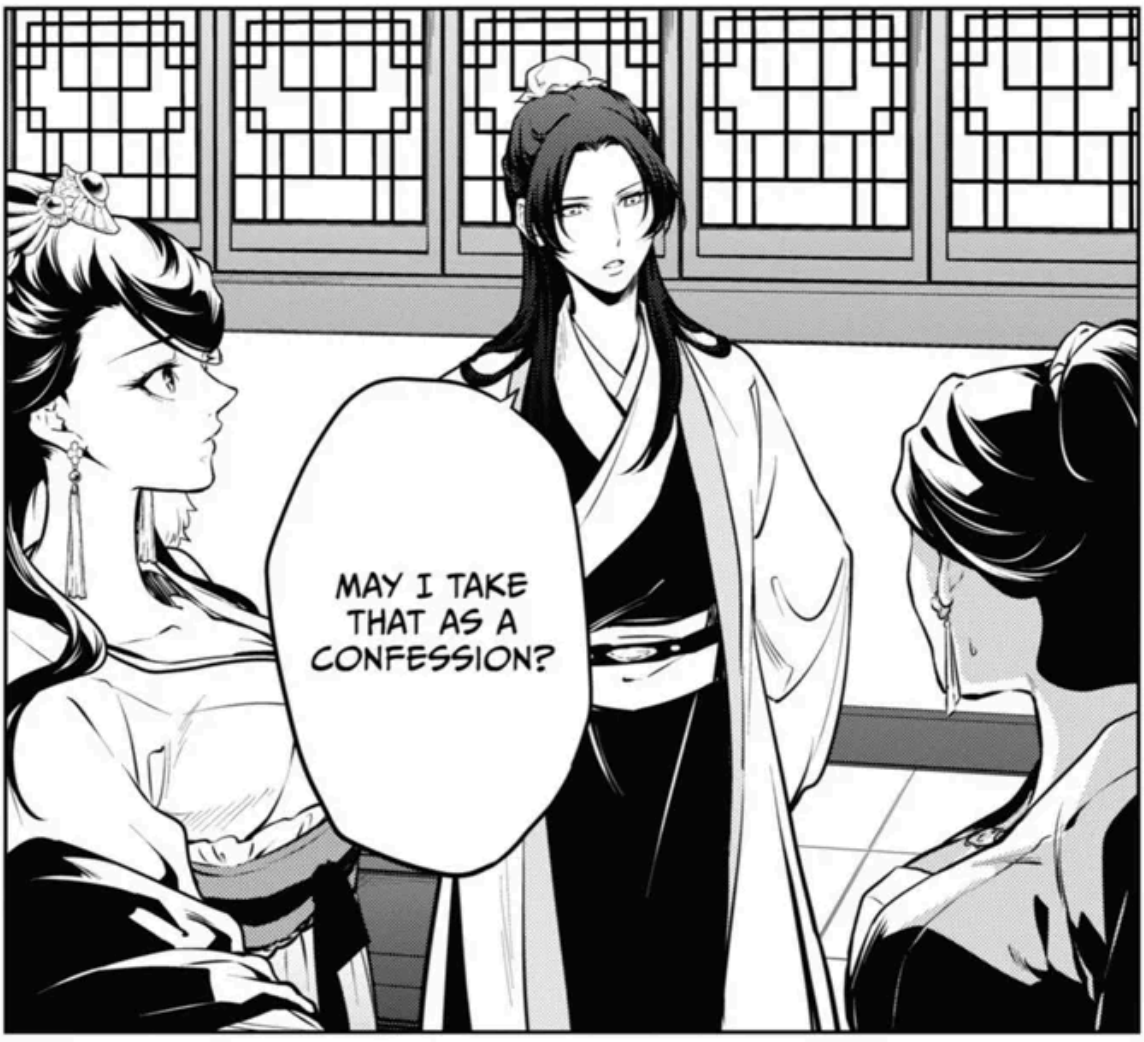
I ALWAYS THOUGHT IT ODD.
LADY LIHUA, WHO IS MORE THAN CAPABLE AS A CONSORT...
HER LADIES ARE ALL INFERIOR BECAUSE HER SERVANTRY WAS INTENTIONALLY ASSEMBLED THAT WAY...
...HAS NO ATTENDANTS OF QUALITY AROUND HER.
...BY HER HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING XING, WHO REIGNS OVER THEM ALL.
...WAS NEVER ONCE CHASTISED AND WAS INSTEAD ALLOWED TO REMAIN HERE IN A POSITION OF POWER...
SO THE WOMAN IN CHARGE OF THE LADY WHO WAS FIRED IN THE TOXIC FACE POWDER INCIDENT...

XING.
AS THE DAUGHTER OF MY FATHER'S OLDER SISTER AND A COUSIN SO CLOSE IN AGE TO ME...
...I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT OF YOU MORE AS MY OWN SISTER.
AND YET...
...YOU'VE NEVER ONCE GIVEN ME THE RESPECT DUE A CONSORT.
I SUPPOSE THAT MUST BE BECAUSE...
...YOU DO NOT THINK ME WORTHY OF BECOMING EMPRESS.
YOU AND I...
WE HAD NO WAY OF KNOWING...
...WHO WOULD BECOME CONSORT UNTIL THE VERY END.

THAT'S TRUE.
XING HAS NEVER ONCE PROPERLY ADDRESSED LADY LIHUA AS "CONSORT."
I'VE ALWAYS HATED THAT ABOUT YOU!
SMACK
...HOW DARE YOU...
...TALK DOWN TO ME LIKE THAT!

I EXCELLED IN MY STUDIES AND IN ETIQUETTE MORE THAN YOU EVER DID!
AND I'M SO MUCH BETTER ...
...AT SO MUCH MORE! AND YET...!
WHY?!
EVERY SINGLE PERSON IN OUR LIVES ...!
IS IT BECAUSE YOUR FATHER IS THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY?
THAT MAKES ME LESSER THAN YOU?
I DON'T BELIEVE THAT ONE BIT!
I WAS BORN TO BE EMPRESS!

IT'S THE BIG DIFFER-ENCE IN BUST SIZE.
...NO, I TAKE THAT BACK.
IT'S THE EVEN BIGGER DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEIR INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERS.


MAY I TAKE THAT AS A CONFESSION?

GRIT
GLARE
WHAP
128

MAY YOU WITHER AWAY IN THIS GARDEN, YOUR WOMB NEVER AGAIN KNOWING FRUIT!
CURSE YOU, LIHUA!
GRAB

DO NOT TOUCH ME!
LET ME GO!
UN-HAND ME AT ONCE!
SUCH FOUL-MOUTHED PEOPLE REALLY DO EXIST.
FILTHY EUNUCH !!
UN-HAND ME!!
CRASH
...XING.

THE "LI" IN LIHUA'S NAME MEANS "PEAR," WHILE XING'S NAME MEANS "APRICOT." THE PEAR AND THE APRICOT, HMM?
BOTH ARE HIGHBORN AND WELL-EDUCATED.
BOTH ARE OF CLOSE LINEAGE AND HAVE SIMILAR NAMES.
BUT THERE ARE MANY FOOLS OUT THERE IN THE WORLD...
...WHO, ALLOWING THEIR EMOTIONS TO RULE THEM, BLUNDER THROUGH LIFE.
AND XING MUST BE ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE.

YOU REALLY LOVE THE EMPEROR, DON'T YOU, LADY XING?
WHAT A STUPID THING TO SAY!
OF COURSE I DO!
WELL, I ONLY MENTION IT BECAUSE...
SHP
...IT SEEMS TO ME THAT WHAT YOU TRULY LOVE IS THE POSITION OF EMPRESS.
GRIN
UNLIKE CONSORT LIHUA...
NOW IT'S OBVIOUS.

...WHAT SHE WOULD LOVE MOST...
EVEN IF XING WERE TO BECOME EMPRESS...
THAT'S WHAT CONSORT LIHUA HAS THAT XING DOES NOT.
...WOULD NOT BE THE PEOPLE, BUT HERSELF SITTING ON THAT THRONE.

SUCH A WOMAN IS UNFIT TO BE EMPRESS.
DESIRING ONLY POWER, SHE WOULD DO THE VERY LEAST REQUIRED OF THE POSITION.

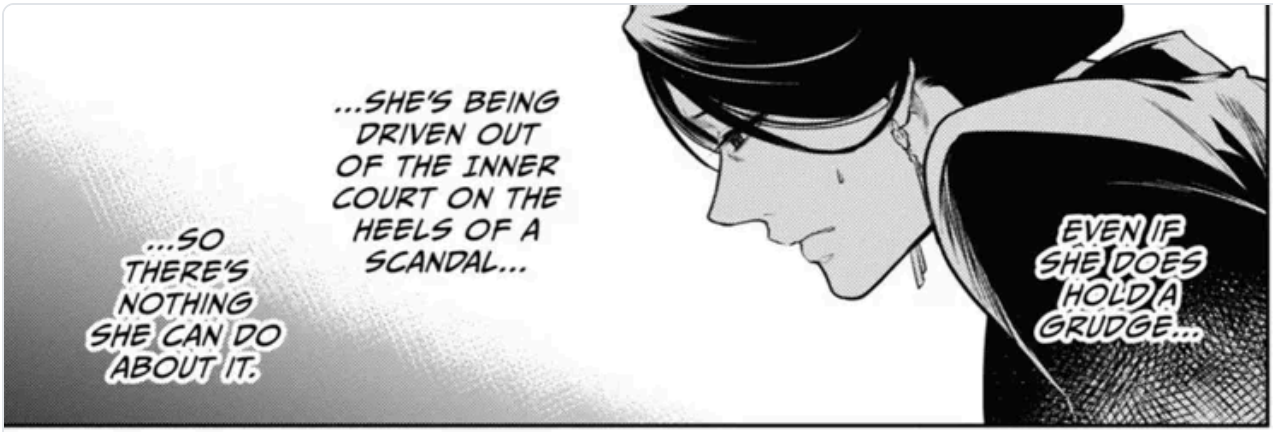
カツ
KLAK
カツ
KLAK

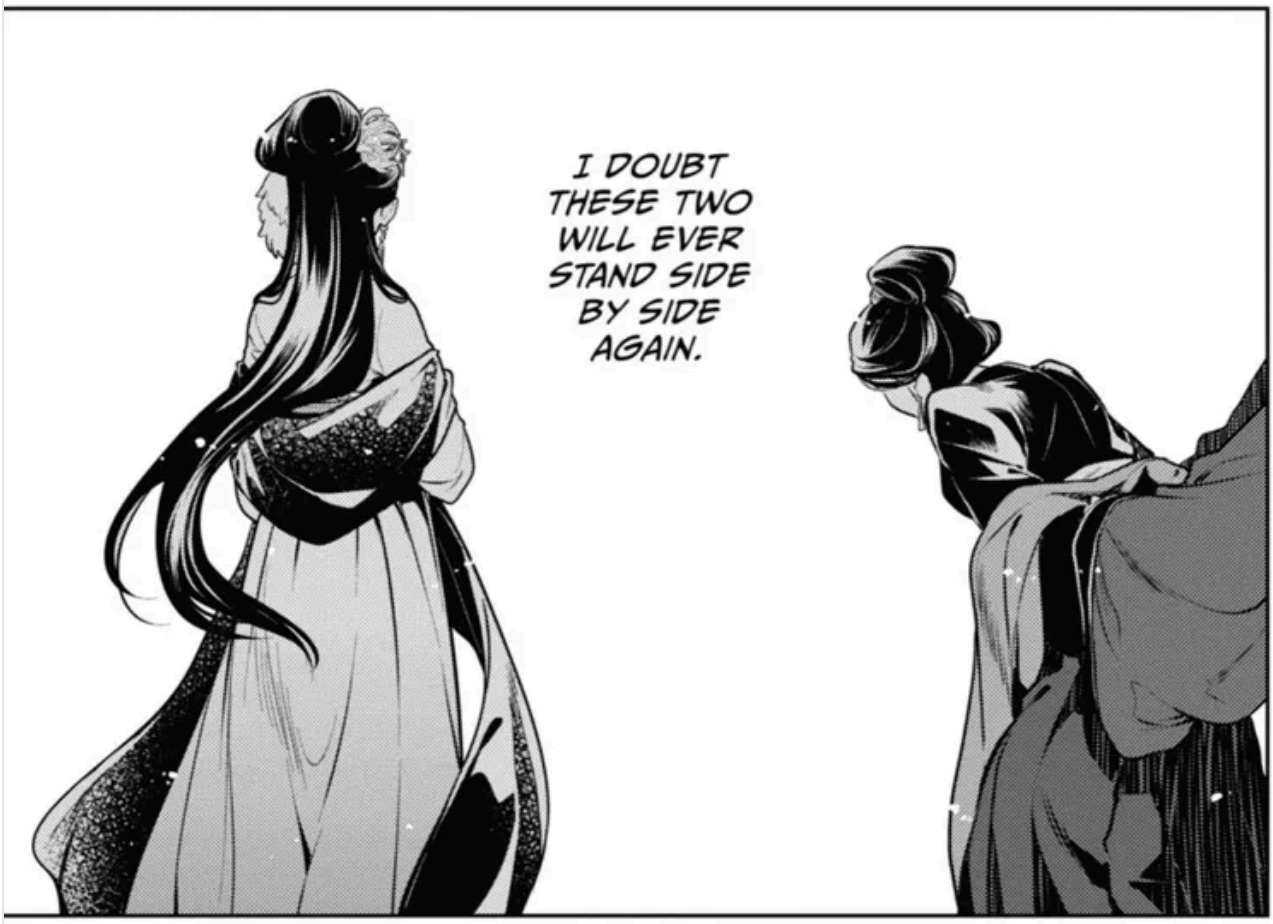
XING.
IS THAT HOW YOU'VE FELT ALL THIS TIME?

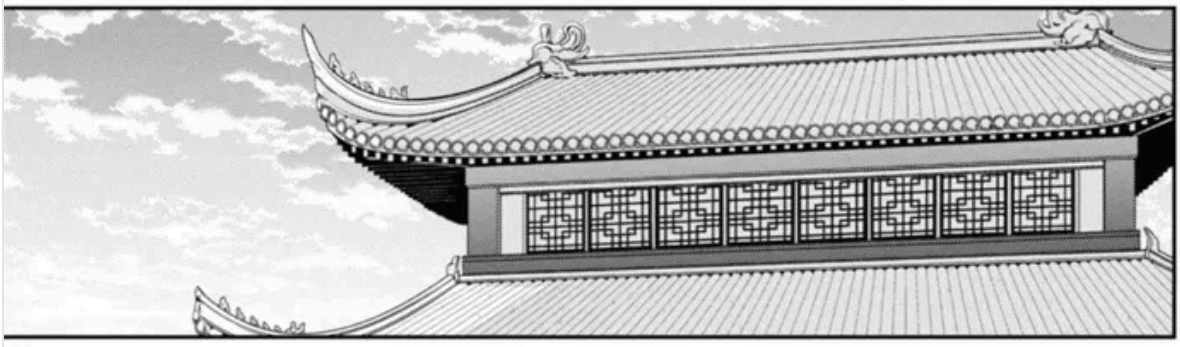
SLAP
しん

WELL, OF COURSE SHE'S FURIOUS.
SIGH...
...IT PAINS ME TO SAY IT, MY LADY...
...BUT A SIMPLE SLAP DOESN'T QUITE COVER THE CRIME.
SHE SPOKE OFFEN-SIVELY TOWARD ME...
...SO MUCH SO THAT IT FORCED ME TO STRIKE HER.
SIR JINSHI.
I HEREBY DISMISS THIS HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING FROM MY SERVICE.
MY LADY!
GRAB
IF YOU INSIST.

GO GET 'EM, MILADY!
PFFT!
CON-SORT LIHUA!
PLEASE CALM YOUR-SELF!
CONSORT LIHUA HAS CHANGED.
GONE IS THE WEAK WOMAN...
...WAITING FOR THE THREAD OF HER LIFE TO SNAP.
PLEASE PROHIBIT HER FROM EVER AGAIN SETTING FOOT WITHIN THE INNER COURT.
A KIND AND LIGHT PUNISH-MENT.
BUT FOR THIS WOMAN, IT SHOULD BE HUMILIATING ENOUGH.


...SO THERE'S NOTHING SHE CAN DO ABOUT IT.
...SHE'S BEING DRIVEN OUT OF THE INNER COURT ON THE HEELS OF A SCANDAL...
EVEN IF SHE DOES HOLD A GRUDGE...


I DOUBT THESE TWO WILL EVER STAND SIDE BY SIDE AGAIN.



CAN I ASK YOU SOMETHING?

I KNOW YOU'VE BEEN TO THE CRYSTAL PALACE MANY TIMES BEFORE...
...BUT I FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE YOU'D BE ABLE TO TELL RIGHT AWAY.
YOU EVEN TOOK PAINS TO WEAR A DISGUISE...
...SINCE WE EXPECTED YOU'D NEED MULTIPLE VISITS.

GO ON.

HOW DID YOU KNOW THE SICK MAID WAS INSIDE THAT SHED?

I HAD MY EYE ON IT.

WHEN I CAME HERE TO HELP OUT BEFORE...
...I HAPPENED TO NOTICE THEM RELOCATING THE BED OF ANOTHER SICK MAID.
SO I FIGURED THAT IF A MAID WAS FEELING POORLY...
...THEY WOULD MOVE HER AWAY FROM THE OTHER MAIDS TO SOMEPLACE INCONSPICUOUS.

I WOULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED THAT THEY'D MOVE HER INTO A SHED, THOUGH.
THAT PLANT THERE ALLOWED ME TO BE SURE.

SO WHAT ABOUT THE PLANT GAVE IT AWAY?
...SO I THINK SOMEONE INTENTIONALLY TRANSPLANTED IT HERE.
IT WASN'T HERE WHEN I CAME TO THE CRYSTAL PALACE BEFORE...
THAT'S RIGHT.
THE SHRUB ...?
...I MUST SAY, IT LOOKS AS IF IT WAS PLANTED RATHER SHODDILY FOR AN ACTUAL GARDENER'S WORK.
...BUT THIS SHRUB HAS ONLY WHITE BLOOMS.
IN FENG SHUI, IT IS SAID THAT A COMBINATION OF GREEN AND WHITE IS GOOD FOR ONE'S HEALTH.
THOSE ARE KNOWN AS FOUR O'CLOCK OR FACE POWDER FLOWERS BECAUSE OF THE WHITE POWDER THAT CAN BE HARVESTED FROM THE SEEDS.
ITS FLOWERS ARE USUALLY RED...
AHH.
...OUT OF SYMPATHY FOR SOMEONE WHO WAS ILL.
IT MADE ME THINK SOMEONE MIGHT'VE TAKEN THE TROUBLE TO FIND AND PLANT A SHRUB WITH THESE RARE WHITE BLOOMS...

BUT STILL, FACE POWDER FLOWERS.
IT'S QUITE IRONIC WHEN YOU CONSIDER THAT WE FOUND THE INGREDIENTS FOR A DRUG THAT WOULD CAUSE A WOMAN TO MISCARRY...
...ALONG WITH THE SICK MAID.
こっそり PEEK
...HM?
WHAT'S WITH THAT MAID?
SIR JINSHI, WHY DON'T YOU GO ON AHEAD?
HOW COME?
YOU WOULD ONLY GET IN THE WAY.
HMPH!

STOMP
どっ
STOMP
どっ
WHAT'S THE MATTER?
OH!
UM...
TMP
TMP
TMP
WHAT BECAME OF...
...THE GIRL WHO WAS IN THERE?
WHITE FLOWERS.

...OHH.
SO SHE'S GONE, THEN.
SHE'S NOT HERE ANY-MORE.
IT'S BEEN ARRANGED FOR HER TO LEAVE THE INNER COURT.
CONSORT LIHUA SAID IT WAS HER RESPONSI-BILITY...
...TO PAY FOR THE MEDICAL FEES AND LIVING EXPENSES OF THE SICK MAID FOR THE TIME BEING.
BUT...
...THAT MEANS SHE'S RECEIVING PROPER TREATMENT IN A BETTER ENVIRONMENT THAN SHE WAS BEFORE.

BOW
...IS THAT SO?